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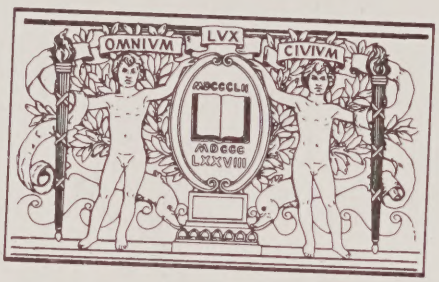

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ROXBURY NEIGHBORHOOD PROFILE 1987

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ROXBURY NEIGHBORHOOD PROFILE

Introductory Overview

Roxbury, in the geographic center of Boston, is one of the city's most historically significant areas. Once an affluent suburban area, the neighborhood grew more densely populated around the turn of the century when streetcar service was extended from the downtown. Its diverse neighborhoods--Highland Park, Sav-Mor, Lower Roxbury and Washington Park--have and will continue to offer numerous housing and development opportunities.

Roxbury remains a desirable place because of its offerings of open space, beautiful housing structures and grand vistas of Boston from its rolling hillsides. However, the area has experienced extensive abandonment and disinvestment in both its commercial and residential sections. As the incomes of successive waves of new residents decreased, maintaining businesses and the existing housing stock became increasingly difficult. The City, State and Federal government have, in the past twenty-five years, invested substantial funds both into the Washington Park Urban Renewal Project as well as the surrounding area. However, the proliferating problems faced by the Roxbury community have far outweighed these public efforts.

Roxbury is now experiencing a new in-migration of young black professionals who are acquiring many of the underutilized and abandoned buildings in the area. Their initiatives, unlike those in the past, are complementing efforts on the part of existing residents as well as renewing the interest of private investors in the area. However, the low incomes and limited job skills of many of the current residents pose major handicaps to their full participation in Roxbury's revitalization.

I. Neighborhood History

The town of Roxbury was founded in 1639 and annexed to Boston in 1868, 229 years later. Roxbury village began near what is now Dudley Station, at the northern edge of the hilly farmland comprising Highland and Washington Parks today. It was connected to Boston by a narrow neck stretching between Back Bay and South Cove, that became Washington Street. In the early 1800s summer houses and country estates were built in these highlands by Boston's wealthy families. Its first major development was from 1840 to 1870 when less expensive versions of Boston townhouses and detached singles and two family houses were constructed along Dudley Street. However, the majority of its residential development took place between 1870 and 1900 as streetcar service was extended into the area and the bays between Roxbury and Boston were filled.

The steeper central highlands area, between Washington Street and Blue Hill Avenue, was developed less densely and become the home of the more affluent families. Houses increased in size towards Franklin Park on its south side. The surrounding areas were developed with more moderately priced housing, such as triple-deckers, especially around the turn of the century.

While Roxbury highlands remained primarily an affluent residential district during the 19th century, lower (northern) Roxbury became the site for light industrial uses and a residential district for the lower income population expanding into Roxbury from the South End. At the same time that black families first moved into Lower Roxbury, Jewish families moved into the southern sections, replacing earlier residents who were predominately Irish.

During the 1940s and 50s, there was a significant migration of blacks from the South. In ten years the racial composition of Roxbury turned from 80 percent white to 80 percent non-white. Today this composition remains, but there are increasing numbers of Spanish-speaking, West Indian and Cape Verdean families, as well as black and white professionals. The influx of non-whites has had a significant impact on business with many now owned by minorities.

By the 1950s housing deterioration became widespread although many areas notably in the Upper (southern) Roxbury highlands remained in good condition. By 1960 community leaders began work on a revitalization process for Washington Park and in 1963 Washington Park became the first residential rehabilitation project undertaken by the Boston Redevelopment Authority. Although there is a sizable middle class group residing in Roxbury today, some sections remain severely impacted by abandoned buildings, vacant lots and crime.

During the 1960s the Washington Park Urban Renewal Project was joined by the Campus High and Kitteredge Square urban renewal areas. An extensive period of public investment from 1962-1978 resulted in much needed improvements to housing, schools, and public facilities although critical accompanying private investment was scarce. Urban Renewal and transportation efforts in the Southwest corridor also brought the demolition of many houses in Roxbury. The 1970-75 period was about the greatest time of economic hardship as disinvestment had occurred for thirty years and jobs were lost during the mid-1970s recession. Also during the 1970s another wave of immigration swept the area as the Hispanic population doubled in 10 years and significant numbers of Haitians, Central and South Americans came to Roxbury.

The last ten years have brought some limited improvements with the benefits of public investment, some private investment, and industrial expansion but the area remains depressed as it still serves a low-income resident population with few job opportunities and little revenues for improvements. Roxbury's socio-economic history shows that the area has been in decline because it lost its local jobs base of industries, suffered from disinvestment in housing and other properties, experienced a decline in retail and commercial services as business moved to wealthier neighborhoods, and supports a significantly larger population of the "needy". Indeed, Roxbury is no longer a self-sufficient local neighborhood economy.

II. Demographic and Socio-Economic Profile

Roxbury is one of Boston's most predominantly minority neighborhoods with 93 percent of the 1985 population minority. While blacks accounted for 75 percent of total residents, significant amounts of Hispanics, Haitians, Caribbean Islanders, and others have grown to total 18 percent. Roxbury has added about 2,000 residents between 1980 and 1985 and the racial composition has reflected these newer minority groups. Only seven percent of Roxbury residents were whites.

The median age of Roxbury residents in 1985 was 28.2 years, only marginally below the city's median of 28.8 years. Roxbury's lower age is due to the larger share of children under age 20, 33 percent compared to the city's 25 percent. Roxbury has a smaller share of young adult population aged 20-29, a larger share of adults aged 30-54 and a smaller share of elderly, aged 65+.

Roxbury was more of a family neighborhood than many neighborhoods in Boston as families accounted for 66 percent of all households, and unrelated individuals only 34 percent. These data compare with 46 percent and 54 percent, respectively, for Boston as a whole. In Roxbury, however, almost one half of all families were single parent households, many with children or other relatives. Only about one-third of Boston's families were headed by single parents. Correspondingly, Roxbury has more married persons but also more divorced, separated, and widowed adults.

Because of Roxbury's growing minority population, a full twenty-one percent of residents spoke a language other than English at home. These included Spanish at 13 percent, French at 5 percent, and other miscellaneous languages at 4 percent. Language spoken reflected the recent Hispanic, Haitian, and Caribbean Islander immigrants.

Roxbury's educational profile shows a much improved educational attainment in the 1980s but gains that still remained lower than those city-wide. While the share of Roxbury residents with at least a high school diploma had improved to 62 percent it still remained below the city norm of 77 percent. In addition, only one in ten black adults had a college education compared to one in three city-wide in 1985.

Labor force participation in Roxbury increased from 56 to 61 percent between 1980 and 1985. City-wide the rate grew from 62 to 66 percent, however. Also, unemployment increased in Roxbury from 10 to 14 percent of the labor force contrasting the Boston rate that moved from 6.1 to 6.5 percent. Unemployment rates were much higher for younger male minority members.

Income data showed the relatively worse position for Roxbury. Median household income was $13,000 for Roxbury residents in 1984 versus $19,250 for the city. Thirty eight percent of all households earned less than $10,000 per year compared to 28 percent city-wide. Also, only 10 percent of Roxbury households had incomes greater than $35,000 in 1984 compared to 22 percent for all Boston households. The 1984 poverty rate for Roxbury was much greater than Boston's at 31 percent and 21 percent, respectively.

III. Housing and Commercial Market

In 1985 there were 23,587 housing units in Roxbury an increase of 2.2 percent since 1980. Assisted and public housing comprised 41 percent (or 9,664 units), of total stock while owner occupied units comprised 18 percent, private rental apartments 37 percent, and condominiums less than 1 percent. The assisted and public housing stock is a larger share of the total than for any other Boston neighborhood. In addition, Roxbury's 19 condominiums units ranked as the lowest number for any neighborhood. There were only 35 lodging houses, with 413 tenants, left in Roxbury in 1985.

The physical quality of housing in Roxbury remained much worse than other neighborhoods. Fifty percent of Roxbury houses need either some work or a great deal of work on their exteriors versus thirty percent city-wide. In addition, 47 percent of Roxbury housing interiors were in fair or poor condition compared to 27 percent for all Boston units.

Roxbury had a gross vacancy rate of 9 percent and a net rate of 7 percent in 1985. This trend, however, was below Roxbury's gross rate of 14 percent in 1980 but above the 6 and 4 percent rates, respectively, for Boston in 1985. The higher vacancy rates in Roxbury were primarily due to a greater amount of boarded and abandoned buildings.

Roxbury has also experienced a rise in rental rates and property values commensurate with city housing trends. Gross median rents increased from $260 to $330 between 1980 and 1985. This might seem low but the sample includes people in assisted and public housing paying little out of their own pockets for rents. Advertised rents from The Boston Globe for Roxbury in 1986 ranged from $400 for a studio, to $505 for a one bedroom to $742 for a three bedroom apartment. Housing values have also seen large recent gains. A three unit building in wards 8, 9, 11, and 12 rose from $19,820 in 1979 to $92,047 in 1985.

The economy of Roxbury consisted of 5,903 jobs in 1981 primarily in the retail, services, and manufacturing industries. Over 1,000 manufacturing jobs were in firms comprised of apparel, furniture, machinery, and metals industries. Over 2,000 services jobs were in personal, repair, and social services industries . Retail and wholesale trade and some construction firms made up most of the remainder of the jobs. The Roxbury labor force contained over 30,000 employees so most workers have to go outside of their neighborhoods for work.

Commercial space in Roxbury is primarily older, less expensive, and unrenovated space in office, retail, and industrial buildings. Dudley Square with 500,000 square feet of office space in 1981 was the largest neighborhood office market in Boston but 60 percent of that was vacant. Roxbury's commercial rents as of fiscal 1986 ranged from $1.51 - $8.04 per square foot for office space with a median of $4.98; $1.84 - $8.72 per square foot for retail space with a median of $5.12; and, $.73 - $4.02 per square for industrial space with a median of $1.49. Currently there are several large construction projects in Roxbury including Morgan Memorial Goodwill Industries and the new Roxbury Community College campus. In addition, the Southwest Corridor and Dudley Square itself are due for increased commercial building after 1987.

Conclusion

The Roxbury neighborhood displays a variety of social, economic, and housing problems. While unemployment, poverty, and property disinvestment remain the primary problems to be solved, some improvements have occurred in the last ten years: specifically, educational attainment, stabilization of crime, advances in professional occupations, and the selected upgrading of the housing stock. Over the last decade Boston's economy as a whole has begun to expand into new vistas of post-industrial America - professional, business, medical, and educational services, finance, real estate, insurance, communication, and high technology industries. The Roxbury community, however, has not yet shared in this new economic future, to any extent. The challenge that presents itself now is how to bring the prosperity of Boston's economy to Roxbury.